



TITLE:

<Book Reviews> Performing the
Divine: Mediums, Markets and
Modernity in Urban Vietnam.
KIRSTEN W. ENDRES. Copenhagen:
NIAS Press, 2011, 244p.

AUTHOR(S):

Hoskins, Janet

CITATION:

Hoskins, Janet. <Book Reviews> Performing the Divine: Mediums, Markets and Modernity in Urban Vietnam. KIRSTEN W. ENDRES. Copenhagen: NIAS Press, 2011, 244p.. Southeast Asian Studies 2012, 1(3): 510-513

ISSUE DATE:

2012-12

URL:

<http://hdl.handle.net/2433/167308>

RIGHT:

stands on solid empirical *and* comparative grounds. But he fails to ask this crucial question to his respondents: have your lives improved considerably since the roads, schools and hospitals were built or improved? The book oddly says nothing about incomes and inequalities, content to rely on the vagueness of terms like development or improvement. We have no idea of how poor Suphanburi was before Banharn started pouring in infrastructure funds; neither are there any data on whether incomes had gone up after the modern highways were in use. Had this question been asked, it is possible that Nishizaki would have received more qualified responses. The admiration for Banharn may come mixed with apprehensions about the family's fortunes while the applause for what the Boss brought from Bangkok could be tempered by worries of a growing class disparity as the rice economy continues to evolve with the spread of high-yielding varieties and their attendant costs.

There is, in fact, very little political economy in this book and this lacuna is where Nishizaki is vulnerable to those who still see Banharn as the quintessential corrupt local boss. There are hints all over, especially when it comes to ascertaining why a certain construction firm got the contract for a particular road (cousins and cronies), but the overall picture of Banharn's corrupt enterprise remains sketchy (how much is Banharn worth? We do not know and his biographer does not tell us). Nishizaki may dither and say this is not what he was interested in, but at the end of the day, when you factor in the issue of whether Suphanburians' lives had improved after the roads were built, he must confront this major issue head on.

These are quibbles that perhaps this smart young scholar may wish to explore in his next book. As for now, let us enjoy this wonderful work, and especially delight in its idiosyncratic take on the "voices from below," where instead of opposition or quiet resistance against those in power, we hear approbations of what the strongman has done for them.

Somewhere in the netherworld Adhemar de Barros is smiling.

Patricio N. Abinales

School of Pacific and Asian Studies, University of Hawai'i-Mānoa

Performing the Divine: Mediums, Markets and Modernity in Urban Vietnam

KIRSTEN W. ENDRES

Copenhagen: NIAS Press, 2011, 244 p.

The resurgence of popular religion in Vietnam has attracted the attention of a large number of scholars, who have recently published works on the music (Norton 2009), hero worship (Phạm Quỳnh Phương 2009), transnational spread (Fjelstad and Nguyễn Thị Hiền 2011) and modernity (Taylor 2007) of the colorful rituals. Kirsten Endres' *Performing the Divine: Mediums, Markets and*

Modernity in Urban Vietnam takes its place among these other valuable studies, and advances a number of complex re-evaluations of contemporary theory in relation to new empirical studies.

Endres tells the story of how she discovered *lên đồng* rituals in 1998 while doing research on village festivals, observing a ceremony in a village that informants had told her was prohibited by the authorities and never performed. Eight years later, the capital city of Hanoi was full of private shrines dedicated to the Mother Goddess and the music from Four Palace ceremonies wafted down from the top floors of the narrow town houses in trendy, affluent neighborhoods as well as more popular ones. Her research took place in the increasingly public sphere of competing master mediums, folkloric performances and new ideas of spirit mediumship rituals as part of an “intangible cultural heritage” which defines Vietnamese identity.

The Four Palace rituals are sometimes described as a “religion of prosperity” in the “alternative modernity” of Vietnam’s new market economy. Recently, they have gained legitimacy and a measure of official recognition through their description as the “Religion of the Mother Goddess” (Đạo Mẫu), seen as the indigenous religion of the Red River Delta, the homeland of Vietnamese tradition. Studies by folklorists like Ngô Đức Thịnh, Nguyễn Thị Hiền and Phạm Quỳnh Phương played an important part in both documenting these practices and arguing that they should be recognized as authentic local culture.

But, as Endres argues, this process of documentation is also a complex one, since it selectively emphasizes certain elements (performance and connections to business success) at the expense of others (healing and divination). It may also lead to a certain standardization of a pantheon once characterized by its fluidity, flexibility and openness to individual innovation.

The vital multiplicity of Vietnamese forms of spirit worship has been subject to some form of administrative control since imperial times, when particular deities were issued imperial certificates of investiture (*sắc phong*) and assigned ranks in official hierarchies. This rank did not necessarily correspond to the popularity or influence of the deity, however, since people thronged to the temples of deities perceived to be spiritually efficacious, whether or not they were sanctioned as historical heroes or heroines. Many of the most responsive deities were, in fact, women who had been wronged: who had been wrongly suspected of infidelity or immorality, who had died young and tragically, and whose cult had been neglected in official centers, only to resurface by possessing new spirit mediums and gaining attention through healings.

Spirit possession was for a long time a peripheral cult of “troubled women,” condemned by communist authorities as a form of superstition and fraud. This profile is now changing, and while women still predominate as ordinary mediums, many if not most of the best-known urban mediums are now male. This transformation has effected what Endres calls the “various political and cultural agendas” that have been played out in the creation of Đạo Mẫu. Among those that she explores are the connections between Đạo Mẫu and commerce, the aesthetic values of performance, gender fluidity and what she calls the “heritagisation” of Four Palace mediumship in today’s Vietnam.

Drawing on Victor Turner's theories of the ritual process and Bruce Kapferer's ideas of the dynamics of ritual performance, Endres analyzes a number of specific ceremonies to discern how "the symbolic system of the Four Palace religion is inscribed into the novice medium's body as lived experience" (p. 24). This process begins with ideas that certain persons have a "spirit root" (*căn đòng*) or a "destined aptitude for mediumship" based the idea of a karmic debt that can only be repaid by serving the spirits in this life. A personal crisis, a string of bad luck, disturbing dreams or a serious illness can all be symptoms of this "spirit root." Endres argues that to understand how a medium can benefit from becoming a medium we must pay attention both to the narratives they present about their pathway into mediumship and to the ritual process through which they come to feel newly empowered by the spirits.

Ritual performances themselves can be highly contested. They have changed significantly from the French colonial era through the period of suppression by the secular state to the present moment of efflorescence. The rise of a new consumer culture has transformed deities once seen as vengeful supernatural beings who punish even the slightest mistakes into more tolerant "exchange partners" willing to work with their mediums to conjure wealth and prosperity in this world. A female dominated cult has also become increasingly male led, with transgendered "celebrity mediums" emerging in recent years as Vietnamese society in general has become more open to gender fluidity.

In the past two decades, Four Palace spirit mediumship has been reborn as "Đạo Mẫu," at the impetus of a number of Vietnamese folklore scholars and anthropologists. Instead of seeing these rituals as a way of serving the gods and deities (in effect, an intense and more dramatic form of ancestor worship), these intellectuals have helped to re-define it as a religion, a pathway with its own implicit ideas and doctrines. Đạo Mẫu makes claims to embody a more authentic and ancient heritage in which the painful events of the twentieth century are completely absent—a telling sort of "historical amnesia" that elides an age of ideological conflict to take refuge in an imperial pantheon of heroes, highland ladies, princes, and princesses.

In this respect, the impetus to standardize and get recognition as "Vietnamese indigenous religion" is similar to the impetus that the leaders of the colonial era "new religion" Caodaism felt, when they moved to define a nation that did not yet exist in terms of a spiritual heritage that emerged from Vietnam's history and colonial experience. But while Caodaists embraced syncretism, and boldly encompassed Jesus Christ and many Christian themes into the overarching East Asian pantheon headed by the Jade Emperor, Đạo Mẫu advocates are moving in a different direction, asserting the modernity of cultural elements once relegated to the domain of rural folklore, tying the destiny of urban businessmen to remote temples scattered across the countryside.

The new Đạo Mẫu has been cleansed of its "superstitious" connections to fortune telling and other "unscientific" functions and recuperated as "an aestheticized performance of spiritual music and dance, worthy of being preserved as part of Vietnam's cultural heritage" (p. 184). In her final

chapter, Endres indicates some more recent aspects of these transformations—the ways in which ethnic minorities have been “hybridized” by their depictions in the performances, and the influence of overseas Vietnamese returning to their homeland to sponsor new rituals and introduce a more sudden, spontaneous form of possession. The old imperial deities have become “cosmopolitan travelers in the transethnic and transnational spiritscapes” (p. 199) inhabited by the newly mobile populations of those who worship them. Endres herself has proved an insightful and perceptive guide along these journeys.

This is an important book as much for the conceptual challenges it presents as the new ethnographic details. It is a theoretically sophisticated study that asks questions about the role of particular agents and power relations in resurrecting and reconstituting a once suppressed set of ritual practices. The answers that it provides will appeal to scholars of religion, ritual and Vietnamese studies.

Janet Hoskins

Anthropology Department, University of Southern California

References

- Fjelstad, Karen; and Nguyễn Thị Hiền. 2011. *Spirits without Borders: Vietnamese Spirit Mediums in a Transnational Age*. Contemporary Anthropology of Religion series. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Norton, Barley. 2009. *Songs for the Spirits: Music and Mediums in Modern Vietnam*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press.
- Phạm Quỳnh Phương. 2009. *Hero and Deity: Trần Hưng Đạo and the Resurgence of Popular Religion in Vietnam*. Chiang Mai: Mekong Press.
- Taylor, Philip, ed. 2007. *Modernity and Re-enchantment: Religion in Post-Revolutionary Vietnam*. Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies.

Natural Potency and Political Power: Forests and State Authority in Contemporary Laos

SARINDA SINGH

Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2012, 192 p.

“Muang Metaphysics”

The question of how the Lao state maintains legitimacy and authority in the countryside is a key topic of interest for both Lao studies scholars and development practitioners. With the development of a resource frontier, based on the development of hydropower, mining and forest-land concessions, the Lao state is increasingly making its full regulatory and extractive presence felt in